

# A Web of opportunity or the same old story? Women digital entrepreneurs and intersectionality theory

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**A Web of Opportunity or the Same Old Story? Women  
Digital Entrepreneurs and Intersectionality Theory**

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A Web of Opportunity or the Same Old Story?

Women Digital Entrepreneurs and Intersectionality Theory

ABSTRACT

This article critically analyses the manner in which intersectionality and related social positionality shape digital enterprise activities. Despite popular claims of meritocratic opportunity enactment within traditional forms of entrepreneurship, ascribed social characteristics intersect to influence the realisation of entrepreneurial potential. However, it is purported that the emerging field of digital entrepreneurship may act as a ‘great leveller’ due to perceived lower barriers to entry, disembodiment of the entrepreneurial actor and the absence of visible markers of disadvantage online. Using an interpretivist approach, we analyse empirical evidence from UK women digital entrepreneurs which reveals how the privileges and disadvantages arising from intersecting social positions of gender, race and class status are reproduced online. This analysis challenges the notion that the Internet is a neutral platform for entrepreneurship and supports our thesis that offline inequality, in the form of marked bodies, social positionality and associated resource constraints, is produced and reproduced in the online environment.

Key Words: entrepreneurship, Internet, intersectionality, digital enterprise, online business, online entrepreneurship, digital, whitewashing, women, gender

Introduction

Popular discourse portrays the Internet as an enabler of entrepreneurial potential given its accessibility as digital enterprise platform (Accenture, 2014; LeBlanc, 2015; Schmidt, 2011). Underpinning such assumptions is an implicit axiom that the widespread uptake of digital technologies has universally increased entrepreneurial possibilities (Castells, 2010; Mole and Mole, 2010). However, how socially marginalised or disadvantaged people have

experienced this shift remains under-explored. Digital entrepreneurship has been defined as 'the pursuit of opportunities based on the use of digital media and other information and communication technologies' (Davidson and Vaast, 2010: 2). Accordingly, focus tends to be placed upon the Internet's enhancement of entrepreneurial opportunity exploitation (Hull et al., 2007). Barriers to entry are expected to be very low; digital start-ups presumably require neither formal premises nor costly equipment, and operations can be flexible whilst technological expertise is either easily accessible or commonly held. Moreover, the virtual environment is assumed to negate social marginality, ensuring greater meritocracy within entrepreneurship by concealing the disadvantages of a 'marked' body (Haraway, 1999).

This article critically evaluates such assumptions with the analytical framework offered by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; May, 2015) and positionality (Anthias, 2001a, 2001b, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2013). We argue that socially constructed disadvantageous ascriptions are reproduced within the digital context. Accordingly, our research objective is to explore how intersecting ascriptions of gender, race and class influence the entrepreneurial experiences of women developing digital ventures. Women, as a category, form the basis of our analysis, not only because the subjugation of women and femininity within the gender binary marks them as a marginalised class (Bradley, 2007), but also in recognition of contemporary feminist critiques of the gendered bias within the ontology of entrepreneurship theorising (Henry et al., 2015). However, despite the universality of gender as a valorisation device, we are wary of the assumption that gender effects are universal (Anthias, 2013; Crenshaw, 2015). Articulated through an intersectional matrix of social positions, issues of race/ethnicity and class, amongst others, necessarily complicate those of gender. Thus, we adopt a positionality-based perspective (Anthias, 2013) to assess if the online environment can ameliorate the entrepreneurial constraints of marginalised social positionality.

To explore such issues, this paper is structured as follows. We commence by outlining the phenomenon of women’s digital entrepreneurship. We then draw upon theories of intersectionality and positionality to analytically consider if and how their impacts may be reproduced within this realm. Next, we illustrate this critique through an interpretative methodology, analysing in-depth qualitative evidence which focuses upon women digital entrepreneurs in the UK, and explores the inter-relationships between gender, race and class in this context. Finally, the implications of these arguments are evaluated in the discussion and conclusion.

**Women, gender and digital entrepreneurship**

The manner in which ascribed characteristics and institutional biases constrain entrepreneurial potential has been explored at length (Ahl, 2006; Högberg et al., 2014). It has been demonstrated that gendered assumptions confer detriment upon women in terms of creating or growing new ventures (Marlow and McAdam, 2015). Disadvantages arising from such biases and related stereotypes have become coterminous with an assumed agentic entrepreneurial deficit. Hence, those who do not resemble the normative entrepreneur – white, male, usually middle class or the hero of a ‘rags to riches’ story (Ogbor, 2000) – find their legitimacy and access to resources constrained by their subject position (Jayawarna et al., 2014a and b). Yet, despite such constraints, women across the globe participate in a diverse range of entrepreneurial activities, developing agentic strategies to gather and exploit resources and navigate complex barriers to their full participation<sup>i</sup> (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Essers et al., 2010; Forson, 2013).

In recent years, the digital environment has been presented in the popular media as a unique entrepreneurial space. Assumptions of its neutrality and meritocratic functionality suggest ‘anyone’ can create a business with only ‘a laptop, something to sell, and your imagination’ (LeBlanc, 2015). This rhetoric of easy income generation specifically hails

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3 marginalised groups – for example, women with caring responsibilities and people of colour  
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5 – who face greater challenges to employment, yet whose entrepreneurial aims are constrained  
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7 by hegemonic conceptions of the entrepreneur. The virtual world is therein portrayed as  
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9 distinct from the physical, where social biases based upon physicality can be transcended due  
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11 to the presumed disembodied nature of interactions (Martin and Wright, 2005).  
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15 But despite substantial growth in online trading, there is still a lack of data on digital  
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17 entrepreneurs. Approximately 12 million people, or 31 percent of UK Internet users, engaged  
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19 in online trading in 2011, representing a 50 percent year-on-year increase from 2010  
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21 (Williams, 2011). Little is known about the diversity and distribution of this activity, and  
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23 even less about the extent to which it may enable individuals to overcome the negative  
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25 aspects of social marginality. Broad heterogeneity exists amongst digital businesses: some  
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27 are heavily tech-based (e.g. web design, e-retail) while others can be classed as digital simply  
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29 because marketing and communications occur predominantly online. The degree of technical  
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31 knowledge and resources required, as well as possibilities for scalability, vary significantly  
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33 between such businesses, although these are rarely taken into consideration as factors in the  
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35 outcomes of entrepreneurial efforts.  
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39 The limited research specifically upon women digital entrepreneurs has been based on  
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41 assumptions of a 'neutral' Web; thus, the manner in which the phenomenon is gendered,  
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43 racialised or affected by class position remains under-explored (Forson and Özbilgin, 2003;  
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45 Jome et al., 2006) and ignored by surveys of Internet use (Harding, 2007; Pew, 2012; Ofcom,  
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47 2011). Furthermore, the wide variety of entrepreneurial activity in which women are engaged  
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49 online tends to be neglected in favour of a focus on high-tech entrepreneurship, popularly  
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51 perceived as the epitome of digital entrepreneurship (Kaplan and Malach-Pines, 2010).  
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53 Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective reveals facets of the phenomenon largely ignored  
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55 by existing conceptions. Cyberfeminist and critical race studies literatures suggest that the  
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online environment is highly integrated with the offline world, and that markers of gender (Sassen, 2002; Wajcman, 2010) and race (Daniels, 2009; 2012; Nakamura, 2008) are both detectable and influential online. New media scholars affirm and extend these theories, illustrating how socio-economic resource disparity is reproduced online (boyd, 2009; Marwick, 2014). Such critique contradicts the claim that the digital landscape constitutes a meritocratic entrepreneurial context. To develop such arguments, we introduce intersectionality and positionality theory as a critical analytical framework with which to consider the impact of social position upon digital entrepreneurial activity.

**Intersectionality and positionality in entrepreneurship studies**

Originating in Black feminism (Crenshaw, 1991, 2015; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981; 2000/2015; May, 2015), the concept of intersectionality illuminated the interaction between non-dominant race and gender categories as a specific form of oppression (Essers et al., 2010), wherein markers of social identity are ‘inextricably interconnected in the production of social practices of exclusion’ (Crenshaw, 1997: 237). In its complex analysis of marginality, intersectionality disengages from the extensively problematised single-axis or additive perspectives (Forson, 2006; Martinez Dy et al., 2014). Instead, exclusionary categories, and the social inequalities they precipitate, are understood as interdependent and mutually constitutive (Bradley and Healy, 2008; Healy et al., 2011). Although a contested construct (Carbin and Edenheim, 2013; Geerts and van der Tuin, 2013), it is nevertheless efficacious in revealing how multiple dimensions of social inequality shape experiences of digital entrepreneurship, posited as a pathway to ameliorate the effects of such inequalities.

The body of work by Anthias on translocational positionality (2001a, 2001b, 2006, 2007, 2008; 2013) outlines a framework elaborating upon the original intersectionality concepts. Anthias argues that intersectionality informs positionality, defined as ‘the space at the intersection of structure (social position/social effects) and agency (social

positioning/meaning and practice)' (2001a: 635). As such, the construct of positionality moves beyond earlier conceptions of intersecting identities, instead highlighting durable yet dynamic social locations and processes. Crucially, positionality is understood to influence resource allocation (Anthias, 2001b), so it is relevant to the relationship between marginality and the resource accumulation vital to founding and growing entrepreneurial ventures.

Women, immigrants, and people of colour remain 'othered' within the entrepreneurial domain but have been subject to increasing, although discrete, analyses of their experiences as business owners (Carter et al., 2015). There are, however, a number of exceptions wherein intersectional perspectives interrogate the simultaneous impacts of race/ethnicity, gender, class and religion on entrepreneurship, in various combinations (Essers et al., 2010; Forson, 2006, 2013; Knight, 2014).<sup>ii</sup> Such studies focus upon gender, race/ethnicity and class as relevant to entrepreneurship given their centrality to positions within social hierarchies and related resource accrual (Anthias, 2001b). Forson (2013) calls attention to the entrepreneurial activities of migrant women of colour, examining confrontations, negotiations and dialogue between simultaneous, and sometimes conflicting, social roles. Nonetheless, how social positions affect entrepreneurial activity in the allegedly neutral digital environment remains under-investigated.

Contemporary intersectional perspectives understand gender, race/ethnicity and class as discursive categories, produced by a range of discourses and practices which convey contextually shifting social meanings (Byrne, 2006; McRobbie, 2009). This aligns with notions of gender in current feminist entrepreneurship theory (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Carter et al., 2015). 'Race' is understood to have socio-historical rather than scientific roots (Hall, 1997); however, the notion of race is still a powerful cultural construct that informs actions and affects lives (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011). It is related to, but not equivalent with, ethnicity: the former is generally accepted to be a broader social category loosely based on



physical characteristics (e.g. Asian, Black, White), whereas the latter is more often tied to aspects of identity such as culture, language, geographical origin or national association (e.g. Bengali, Jamaican, Irish) (see Karner, 2007). Yet they are closely linked: discrimination on ethnic grounds may be called racism, and racial and ethnic minorities may experience some commonalities of experience, although the significance of skin colour (or other racialised phenotypical characteristics) as a marker of difference varies between societies (Eriksen, 1996: 30; Holvino, 2010). They may also be combined; in the UK, British Asian, Black British and White British are common racio-ethnic descriptors. In this article, we focus primarily on race given the manner in which physical appearance serves, not unproblematically, as a marker for racial categorisation, which we argue is sustained in the online space.

The final category, social class, is conceptualised as encompassing not merely economic phenomena but also social and cultural distinction and reproduction, although economic relations are still key shapers of this dynamic (Savage et al., 2013; Bradley, 2014). Although the term is fluid, and the problem of theorising the relationship between class status and socio-economic position the subject of persistent debate (Ashley and Empson, 2013), we stress its relevance given the nature of resource distribution as a critical factor in entrepreneurial activity.

Anthias (2001a) identifies social positions as characterised by hierarchical difference and unequal access to economic, political, symbolic and cultural resources. Naturalised via continuous social reinforcement, these hierarchies are made to appear invisible by means of apparent normalcy (Acker, 2006; Ahmed, 2012). Evidence suggests structural inequalities persist despite policy initiatives to promote equal opportunities (Holvino, 2010; Tomlinson et al., 2013). From a positional perspective, then, entrepreneurship is embedded within complex social hierarchies which influence the unequal accumulation of resources. Consequently, a

marginal positionality constraining the accrual of human, social and economic capital (Anthias, 2001b), is likely to pose structural barriers to entrepreneurial activity.

Our research proposition, therefore, is to ascertain how the positionality of entrepreneurial actors in co-constituted social hierarchies of gender, race and class affects their legitimacy and access to resources for creating sustainable digital ventures. Eriksson-Zetterquist et al. (2009) argue that in order to understand technology's potential effects, analysing the social settings, political, economic and cultural contexts in which it is used is essential. But popular discourse on digital entrepreneurship (Accenture, 2014, Genachowski, 2011; Government Equalities Office, 2014) does not appear to consider this argument. Analytical attention should be given to the influence of social hierarchies, positionality and resource distribution on digital entrepreneurial activity, and, more broadly, how nuanced experiences of privilege and disadvantage function in the increasingly significant context of the digital environment. Failure to do so will likely result in theoretical neglect of the manner in which social disadvantage is transmuted and reproduced online (boyd, 2009; Ituma and Simpson, 2009; Marwick, 2014).

### *Analytical Summary*

Contemporary cultural discourse regarding digital entrepreneurship is implicitly imbued with the rhetoric of meritocracy, arising from the belief that actors operate virtually in a supposedly neutral online environment. We draw upon interdisciplinary literature to consider how this notion may be contradicted through tacit practices which manifest the socially embedded and embodied presence, and barriers encountered by marginalised actors. Whilst much has been made of the ease of entrepreneurship through the Internet, accessing appropriate resources remains critical to create a sustainable venture. We suggest the axiom applied to offline entrepreneurship - the greater the resources invested at start-up, the greater the chances of longevity and growth - (Anyadike-Danes et al., 2015) applies equally to online

ventures. A theoretical framework based upon intersectionality and positionality theory enables us to examine the effects of gender, race and class upon entrepreneurial activity. With it, we map known dimensions of offline inequality and explore them in the online context. This is necessary in order to understand whether digital entrepreneurship is able to ameliorate social inequality, or whether it may be reproduced online. We argue that the social privileges and material resources available to invest in digital ventures are critically linked to the positionality of individuals within social hierarchies. Using empirical evidence, we now illustrate how gender, class and race work in concert to position women digital entrepreneurs in specific social locations, and explore related implications.

**Methodology and method**

As this study explores the lived experiences of digital entrepreneurs, a qualitative, interpretivist approach is axiomatic (Barbour, 2001; Case, 2003; Weick, 2007). We aim to enable women’s experiences to be analysed without comparison to an ‘unmarked male template’ (Jackson, 2012: 1001) which negatively affects how their activity is perceived (De Bruin et al., 2007; Ahl, 2006). Our intersectional approach recognises first, that the experiences of women of colour are qualitatively different from those of white women; second, that in Western contexts, whiteness functions as an unmarked normative social position, similar to maleness (Ahmed, 2012; Byrne, 2006), and third, that class status and history is closely related to resource accumulation, with associated effects on entrepreneurship (Jayawarna et al., 2014b). Whilst the notion of the co-constitutive nature of categories and their effects is fundamental to our arguments, we proceed under the epistemological assumption that gender, race and class can be analysed separately although ontologically, they are articulated in conjunction (Adib and Guerrier, 2003).

The study consisted of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 26 women digital entrepreneurs within the UK. As all women are understood to have a non-dominant gendered

ascription, gender was used as the initial framing category, but the ways in which class status and ascriptions of race influenced legitimacy, image and resource accrual were also explored. Initial contacts were obtained through a UK women's business incubator using a purposive sampling method (Guest et al., 2006). Participant firms were located in diverse sectors, with trading histories ranging from three months to 13 years. The interviews focused on three areas: social factors and resources that enabled or constrained start-up, technical skills, and benefits and challenges of digital entrepreneurship. They were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded using NVivo10, and analysed thematically. Demographic information was collected with a participant survey.

To action the analytical constructs, each subject was asked to self-identify their gender and race. All respondents identified as women and one as a transgender woman. We recognise that such identity markers are externally ascribed but also internally interpreted; accordingly, we utilised respondent articulations of gender and race. Allocating class status, however, is more challenging given the controversy surrounding this ascription, in conjunction with diverse and complex indicators (Savage et al., 2013). We draw upon a concept of class that understands access to various capitals, namely economic, social, cultural and symbolic, as the consequences of a non-neutral social process shaped not only by culture, but also institutions and structures (Ashley and Empson, 2013). To operationalise the concept, we used substantive and reflective indicators from respondents and observational indicators from the primary researcher, paying particular attention to household income, personal income, education and employment history, job title at last paid position, and the inferred social level of personal and business networks. We then drew links between this data, our theoretical framework and the resources available both at start-up and at the time of interview, in order to infer information about their socio-economic class, which we mapped to the UK class model outlined by Bradley (2014, Appendix A).

Following the thematic analytical method of Braun and Clarke (2006) and the qualitative (interview-based) methods approach of Guest et al. (2006), we used an iterative process of analysis alternating between deduction and induction. Coding was accomplished in four rounds. An initial list of broad codes was developed based on key concepts extracted from the literature analysis and methodology; this included: gender, race, ethnicity, class, resources, intersections, benefits and challenges of the digital environment for entrepreneurship. The first round occurred during transcription when passages relevant to the research question were marked and coded. Data was then imported into NVivo10 and coded using the start list; additional broad codes were developed and shared with the research team to establish content validity and reliability through independent assessment. Inductive coding was then undertaken to develop finer first order concepts. The constant comparative method was used, so newly gathered data was compared with previously collected and coded data (Bowen, 2008). This included identifying emergent links between data points, adding new codes to segments of previously coded interviews and excluding extraneous codes for a near-finalised codebook. Respondents were then individually consulted to confirm that their voices were being appropriately translated, after which a final round of coding took place.

Next, we considered the conceptual relationships between codes and concepts, sorting them into potential second order themes and aggregate dimensions (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Gioia et al., 2012). To confirm themes, we considered both their frequency across interviews and the varying weights and meanings of related concepts afforded by different interviewees. For further refinement, coded data extracts were reviewed for suitability and fit with emergent themes and dimensions. Lastly, the entire data set was reviewed to confirm that the final data structure (Figure 1, adapted from Gioia et al., 2012) accurately reflected the richness of the data as well as addressed the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

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INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

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As Jackson (2012) notes, the power hierarchy between researchers and respondents can lead to the ‘ventriloquisation’ of conversations whereby original voices are translated into narratives that fit academic analyses. This encourages an epistemological bias that Golombisky (2006) argues prioritises the researcher voice in contemporary social science. Thus, to ensure a reflexive feminist approach and avoid academic ventriloquism, a condensed version of the thematic analysis (Appendix B) was sent to respondents with their feedback incorporated into the final analysis.

#### *Sample Characteristics*

Table 1 describes the characteristics of the sample and their firms. Further detail is available in Appendix C.

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#### **Encountering structural inequalities online: Traditional gender roles, resource access, visibility and invisibility**

Three key areas pertaining to structural inequalities in social positionality and resource access were identified in participant accounts: impact of traditional gender roles, resourcing the firm, and issues of visibility/invisibility online. Although each experience was unique, the thematic areas in which structural inequality was evident visibly corresponded with the social categories of gender, class and race, reiterating the critical nature of these categories to processes of social valorisation and experiences of entrepreneurship (Anthias,

2013; Bradley, 2007; Jayawarna et al., 2014b). This is significant; it indicates that experiences of digital entrepreneurship are still subject to the social biases that inform offline entrepreneurship and therefore are not negated in the digital context. In addition, the interaction of inequalities in the unique positionalities of subjects produced complex intersectional experiences of privilege and disadvantage, which we explore in the findings and discussion.

*Traditional gender roles and digital entrepreneurship*

Reflecting labour market segregation (Bradley, 2007; Mayer, 2006), the majority (19) of respondents created new ventures in feminised sectors such as health and beauty, apparel, or marketing services, which related to previous employment. Creating new businesses linked to past employment is typical for all new start-ups (Storey and Greene, 2010), a trend which reproduces the gendered divisions evident within the wider economy. Unsurprisingly, such structural differences were replicated in the online environment. However, there is a key difference: regardless of sector, these women are operating within a digital technological context. Thus, traditionally feminised activities are transposed into the realm of computing, which is embedded in masculinity (Wajcman, 2010). Despite a long history of accomplished women programmers and computer scientists, with numerous notable examples (e.g. Margaret Hamilton, Grace Hopper, Mae Jemison, Ada Lovelace, Steve Shirley), the number of women pursuing computer science degrees has decreased sharply since the 1980s (Fessenden, 2014; Henn, 2014), whilst women leave the technology industry at high rates due to hostility and sexism at work and online (Lien, 2015; Wu, 2015).

Kelan (2009) identifies a persistent tension between feminine stereotypes and beliefs about technological competence. As R3 (MR:UW:web design), noted: ‘A lot of people do think that women in technology are a bit thick. And quite often at meeting I will say, I’m not just a pretty face. I do know how to build a website. And people are a bit taken aback by



that.’ Similarly, R1 (WB:MM:e-retail) described having her capabilities and online venture underestimated such that she is ‘not taken seriously’: ‘I [say I] do a website and then it’s like oh, eBay. So they just think you’re new and you’re stupid...I just find they don’t take you that seriously.’ Even in an industry not explicitly digital, compromised legitimacy due to gender was a concern espoused by other respondents, such as R12 (WB:MM:arts and crafts): ‘When I very first started out I wasn’t taken seriously, and they saw me as a bit of a little girl, and they [were] just entertaining me really... You’ve really got to put your foot down, in order for people to take you seriously.’

*The function of hegemonic femininity and masculinity* At the same time, hegemonic femininity was constructed by some as an asset to business relations. The popular assumption that women have superior communication and relationship-building skills emerged for respondents who felt able to connect with clients in ways men could not: ‘I’ve got quite a friendly approachable way about me that sometimes men don’t necessarily have’ (R12:WB:MM:arts and crafts). Whilst acknowledging sexism in the wider business world, R26 felt the typical characteristics women are presumed to possess enabled them to compete in small business: ‘it is a man’s world, in a lot of industries, but I think actually in small business you can make yourself stand out and compete against men in the same, if not in a better way, because you’ve probably got the empathy and that side of things that men might not necessarily have’ (BA:UM:marketing).

Similarly, R23 associated empathy with women and decisiveness and problem-solving with men, noting that in order to problem-solve effectively, one may have to be ‘man and woman’ simultaneously: ‘people might write in complaining about an article. [We have to] address it, deal with it, write back to them, say I acknowledge your viewpoints, we’ll take it into consideration...sort out problems. So you have to be a man, but a woman’ (BB:LM:editing). R9 observed that she played a stereotypically feminine role in the business:



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3 ‘typically a woman would be the organiser, the person running the back end of things making  
4 sure everything’s running smoothly, and I definitely fit into that’ (WB:LM:digital marketing).  
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7 These accounts illustrate that the virtual aspects of a business do not preclude hegemonic  
8 femininity and masculinity from shaping the mind-sets of respondents and customers and  
9 consequently, experiences of digital entrepreneurship.  
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14 *Flexibility and family life* Given the tensions between accommodating employment  
15 demands and domestic responsibilities, contemporary popular and business media (e.g.  
16 Forbes, Huffington Post, Mashable) has heralded entrepreneurship as a solution for women  
17 (Akalp, 2011; LeBlanc, 2015; MacNeil, 2012). It is assumed that by enacting  
18 entrepreneurship through self-employment, thereby creating one’s own job (Kitching and  
19 Marlow, 2013), agentic power to determine terms and conditions of labour is transferred to  
20 the self-employed individual. This is deemed particularly useful for women as it appears to  
21 convey the authority to organise waged work around domestic rhythms (Jayawarna et al.,  
22 2014b). Such advantages are expected to be enhanced for digital entrepreneurs, as the  
23 business ‘tool-kit’ of computing devices and technical knowledge occupy little physical  
24 space, and interactions take place in the seemingly atemporal environment of the Internet  
25 (Kelan, 2009; Mason et al., 2011). This point was echoed by those respondents motivated by  
26 the belief that digital entrepreneurship would enable a better work-life balance, offering  
27 specific forms of flexibility whilst requiring few resources for relatively rapid returns. R16  
28 (BB:LM:e-retail) succinctly captured the sentiments of respondents with family  
29 responsibilities: ‘It makes it easier for women because they can manage home life, family  
30 life, and run a business from home’.  
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53 Recent critiques of the argument that home-based entrepreneurship offers women  
54 flexibility to meld a range of domestic demands with economic participation have noted the  
55 naiveté of such assumptions (Marlow, 2014). Commercial enterprises are subject to market  
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discipline via customer demands which undermines the notion of personal autonomy. Indeed, women with childcare responsibilities who opted for digital entrepreneurship as a flexible work strategy were generally unable to reconcile such tensions. Embedding the work space in the domestic environment through a digital medium removed traditional physical and temporal barriers, so the business was a constant and demanding presence. R5 (BB:UM:e-retail/service) noted: 'I gave up one high-stress job for time with my kids, and I'm just not having time with my kids'. R22 (BA:UW:training) stated that working at home in order to spend more time with her children had been completely counter-productive: 'The biggest challenge for me now is they [my children] are here and I feel that I'm not as constructive as I could be if I was working away from the house'. What emerges here is a contradiction: rather than resolving the friction between caring roles and economic participation, home-based digital enterprise can intensify both areas of responsibility rather than achieving confluence (Marlow, 2002; Rouse and Jayawarna, 2006).

The experience of R13 (BA:UM:fashion design/e-retail) illustrates an intersectional challenge due to the expectations of her husband's family that she adheres to traditional Asian femininity, wherein the husband is the breadwinner: '...they've tried to turn me away and say look, leave it to your husband to bring in the money, you don't need to do this. They couldn't understand my reasons for it.' As one of the few respondents explicitly focused on building a global, growth business, she also noted that motherhood made it 'difficult to start a business,' and that if she not had a child, she might have been 'in a better position' and more able to travel for business. To avoid familial disapproval, she hid her business from her in-laws and so was unable to take advantage of childcare that would otherwise be available.

Even for women without children, or those with sufficient financial resources to purchase childcare, the virtual nature of trading online created a high-pressure context in which the business was 'always open'. Indeed, given the importance of electronic

performance reviews for Internet ventures, ensuring prompt responses is imperative, which exacerbates time management stresses. This evidence suggests that rather than acting to ameliorate time pressures and generate flexibility, digital entrepreneurship presents new challenges as the epitome of contemporary trends whereby technology blurs the physical and temporal barriers between workplace and home (Wajcman, 2015).

*Resourcing the firm: Relating social class to resource access*

This analysis highlights the resurgence of familiar themes regarding the disadvantageous influence of gender upon women’s entrepreneurial activities, presenting a challenge to the alleged neutrality of the digital context. Yet, recognising the limitations of using gender as a generic discriminator, our second analytical theme explores class position and in particular, entrepreneurial resource accrual. Such resources include substantive elements such as finance, and more tacit elements such as time and various forms of human capital (Jayawarna et al., 2014a). Consequently, how class positions individuals in the socio-economic context is critical in terms of their ability to access and accrue such resources. Generally, potential entrepreneurs with high levels of education, financial capital, business experience and industry contacts are more likely to create ventures which endure and grow (Jones, 2014; Wright et al., 2015); this is the case in the high-tech sphere as well (Braguinsky et al., 2012). Our empirical evidence supports this argument, as the influence of social class upon resource acquisition was fundamental, despite the digital context being lauded as requiring few resources to facilitate new venture creation. However, the relative importance of specific pools of resources varied dependent upon positionality, and affected the types of businesses in which respondents engaged.

*The relative importance of technical knowledge* Technical knowledge, or alternatively, access to the services of people who possessed it, was a significant human capital resource. Continual, dynamic learning regarding digital selling technologies and tools was necessary to

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3 develop a web presence and communicate effectively with industry professionals, particularly  
4 website development and technical support providers. Crucially, those who had adequate  
5 financial and temporal resources, in addition to the human capital of business and  
6 management experience from previous employment, mobilised these resources alongside any  
7 technical knowledge. Privileged positionality equipped them with sufficient antecedent social  
8 resources to overcome knowledge limitations and develop their entrepreneurial ideas.  
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17 Staying abreast of the dynamism of the online space was central to respondent  
18 discussions. As R6 (BA:UM:e-retail) noted: 'It's constant learning and developing. Because  
19 the online space changes so quickly...if you don't know, you cannot really work with  
20 anybody to tell them what you want because they will talk in a language that you can't  
21 understand.' R9 (WB:LM:web design) echoed this: 'If you don't understand it, then how are  
22 you supposed to understand where your money's going? It doesn't work.' This ability to  
23 understand was attained through a continuous process of self-education combining intensive  
24 research, paid training, drawing upon network contacts and hiring professional assistance.  
25 These options required varying combinations of finance and time, both of which were  
26 facilitated by higher positionality.  
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39 The interlinked nature of financial and temporal resources and their centrality to  
40 success in the online space was illustrated by R20: 'I think that when you factor in the costs  
41 of the time needed to participate in the things that would make you visible online, whether  
42 you do it in a bootstrapping sense, as in you learn how to do these things and you do them  
43 yourself, or you hire in an agency and they help you do it, overall it's going to cost you more  
44 [than in the past] to prove a concept online.' She, along with other respondents who had been  
45 working in the digital space for more than ten years, observed that what it takes today to have  
46 a successful online business is dramatically different to a decade ago. R13 (BA:UM:fashion  
47 design/e-retail) concurred: 'In 2005 it was a lot easier just to get a domain, to place yourself.  
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3 It was a simple SEO process...But now I think it's so crowded that you have to do so much  
4 more, you need to do PR, you need blogging. Google made it tougher to get yourself ranked.'  
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6 More recent entrants were unaware of this and entered the space naively: 'In my ignorance I  
7 thought once I got the website up I assumed people would just find me. So it was a case of  
8 getting my website noticed, getting on Google, using the right keywords on Google to  
9 advertise and promote it, and that took – it took, before I started getting recognised and sales  
10 coming in, probably about four or five months' (R16: BB:LM:e-retail).  
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19 Access to knowledgeable networks proved to be a key source of social advantage. R4  
20 (WB:UM:e-retail) belonged to a governmental task force in which she engaged with CEOs of  
21 leading e-commerce firms. She leveraged extensively off these networks: 'you get to meet  
22 people that are quite high up in the other businesses. To me that's really useful, because I can  
23 then drop them a line on LinkedIn and go, "Listen, I've got a problem..." Having such  
24 informal access to experts enabled the development of her knowledge base and skill-set. In  
25 contrast, working-class women without such advantages (e.g. R3, R17) spoke of trying to  
26 build networks and the need to prove themselves throughout their careers, illustrating a  
27 dearth of social capital resources. Given such disadvantages, technological competence  
28 became essential for them in a manner not evident for more affluent women.  
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42 The relevance of class-based influences upon cultural and educational experiences  
43 was also evident. For example, R6 (BA:UM:e-retail) explained: 'My parents were very  
44 educated and came from a socioeconomic class where education is so important. [They]  
45 exposed us to everything, and gave us the best of everything in terms of exposure and  
46 education.' She linked her elite educational background to the confidence needed to  
47 undertake her digital enterprise: 'if you have [the] ability to go to the best institutions in the  
48 world, they...carry you in a way where you feel that you're more confident, and ... you have  
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the ability to go out there and create change.’ In this case, class-based privilege somewhat ameliorated the expected constraints of a non-dominant gender and racial positionality.

*The critical nature of financial resources* Operating a digital business cheaply and flexibly appealed to respondents in most circumstances. This included those who wanted to manage child care, women disillusioned with previous employment and seeking a new career, and highly educated and experienced women faced with intersecting gendered, racialised, and ageist barriers to continued participation in the labour market. Thus, regardless of their situation, respondents stated they elected to create a digital business as it appeared more accessible than a bricks-and-mortar business. Yet, despite the ostensibly lower entry costs, a lack of financial resources, combined with limited knowledge and business support services presented significant challenges, especially to those in the lowest socio-economic positions.

The case of R17 (BB:UU:e-retail) offers an example of a marginalised and economically vulnerable individual pushed into entrepreneurship despite a dearth of resources and human capital. An unemployed hairdresser claiming benefits, the Jobcentre encouraged her to start an e-retail business by joining the now-defunct ‘Get British Businesses Online’ scheme, which offered a free website for two years. With few financial resources and experiencing losses on her site, difficulties in accessing resources evoked fear and insecurity: ‘I’d have to start paying to continue. I’d have to start funding my own website, so there’s lots of things I still need to learn to do. And certain things I’m sort of nervous to do it in case I mess it up.’ Her lack of human capital was a key obstacle: ‘I’ve got no technical experience. I’m not very good with the Internet.’ She also repeatedly pointed to a lack of financial resources underpinning every business challenge stating, ‘There are so many different things that have to be done if you want to be successful selling on the Internet. I thought it was an easy thing but it’s not. It’s only easy if you’ve got money.’

The experience of R7 (WB:P:fashion design), a precarious worker, illustrated another type of financial challenge. To fund her business she took a minimum-wage job, restricting the time available to invest in her new venture: ‘I funded mine through my part-time job. And then I started to work full-time, and I had the money to fund it, just not the time...it’s a difficult balance to achieve’. Thus, despite the assumption that starting digital businesses is generally low-cost, for working class people and precarious workers attempting to trade online, finance emerged as critical issue. In the case of e-retailers, transactional payment websites could be prohibitively expensive, maintaining stock levels to satisfy uncertain demand was challenging, and buying in support was simply unaffordable.

Even beyond the start-up stage, digital entrepreneurship can be costly; resources are continuously utilised for site optimisation and search engine discovery. This is a critical aspect of online trading, as noted by R11 (BB:UM:make-up school): ‘If you’re doing a Google advert and you only have £100, no one’s going to see it. Other people are spending £1000 every day. So you’re competing with much, much bigger players.’ Neither is it necessarily low-risk; R2 (BB:MM:manufacturing/e-retail), funded her business by drawing upon her pension, investing her only source of future security: ‘I’ve got no money...I was able to actually cash in a percentage of my pension and that’s actually what I used to initiate the business. Imagine having to start a business, with a pension.’ However, that she had a pension pot to access at all illustrates the class-based benefits of a middle-class professional career for the pursuit of digital entrepreneurial aims. Notably, those who reported having access to all the resources they might need were educated, middle-class white women with professional/management experience and financial resources: ‘I think everything that I would need, I would be comfortable in accessing’ (R8:WB:MM:vintage fashion).

*Visibility and invisibility online*



Our critical analysis of the Internet as a trading platform suggests that the alleged neutrality of the digital environment does not compensate for constructed social ascriptions and class-related resource constraints. However, operating remotely and using electronic representations may still be expected to remove the marked body as a legitimating physical representation of the business. In contrast to historical experiences of women working in the male-dominated IT field, such as Dame Stephanie Shirley adopting the name 'Steve', none of the respondents reported concealing their identity as women. But whilst gender remained a substantive presence, for example, informing sectoral choices and impacting upon legitimacy and resource accrual – the complex process of using physicality as an evaluatory process is explored in more detail here in relation to the category of race.

*Whitewashing websites* Black British and British Asian respondents illustrated how, even on the Web, whiteness served as a privilege and political resource inaccessible to entrepreneurs of colour. This was manifest in decisions regarding digital profiles, branding and marketing, activities crucial for customer capture in what is portrayed as a neutral marketplace. Such decisions included consideration of a process termed 'whitewashing' (R5:BB:UM:e-retail/service) as a strategy to address anticipated discrimination. This practice, adopted to conceal ethnic names, identities and racialised physical appearances in order to appeal to a wider market, arose several times during interviews. As R5 reflected: 'As soon as...there's a black face or a minority face, it seems to be generally accepted that those products are for black people. So you have to kind of whitewash it [to] get more sales'. A respondent with a Nigerian name (R24:BB:MM:consulting) was asked by a business partner to whitewash her online profile to appeal to a wider market: 'You'd have to change your picture, change your name, so you're a white person with a white name. And she said, you know, have a think about it'. R23 (BB:LM:editing) explained that as a black woman, whitewashing was one option to avoid the 'risk' of making yourself visible: 'I didn't want to



put my picture on...cos I know it's risky...as a black woman. It could mean lack of business, people don't want to use you, they don't trust you...or do you put blonde people on the front of all your pictures?' Another respondent (R22:BA:UW:training) whitewashed by using an Anglicised version of her name: 'I...hid my identity as an Asian woman because I believed that if people saw my name...they'd be thinking who is she, is she foreign or what is she. So I used to hide my name.' Eventually, however, her discomfort with this deception prompted her to abandon this stance: 'I took all the masks off, I put the little decoration on my forehead, the bindi, and I thought, you know, I'm an Asian woman, this is what I'm good at, this is what I'm going to do'.

Conversely, maintaining a visible ethnic identity was important for products aimed at specific minority markets, inspiring trust and familiarity. For example, R5 (BB:UM:e-retail/service), some of whose products were specifically for Afro-textured hair, noted 'It helps to have the face that they're expecting to see when I say yeah, I have that problem.' Yet, this was also deemed a limiting strategy as such markets were constrained by their niche reach and appeal. Her portfolio also included products intended for a mass market, and she described challenges in communicating with a wider audience: 'We shouldn't...have to remove all the black images so that I can get "everybody". It doesn't work. It makes me very frustrated.' In contrast, for white respondents, the influence of their own race upon the business appeared inconsequential; it did not factor highly, if at all, in their decisions. Comments on race and ethnicity reflected the assumption that they were, along with other social markers, easily 'hidden' online: 'You're not restricted by class, gender, ethnicity, because you can portray yourself however you want' (R9:WB:LM:digital marketing). Another white participant questioned the rationale for exposing identifying markers unless it 'added value': 'Why would you want to go around with a tattoo on your head saying you're a lesbian or you're black or you're...do you know what I mean? It's one of those things that

you would bring into a relationship, whether that's a professional relationship or otherwise. Because it adds value to the relationship' (R20:WB:MM:e-retail/consultancy).

It is evident from these responses that race was generally of little consequence for the white participants. Whilst belonging to a marginalised race is neither private nor concealable, the effects of 'whiteness' are invisible. It is normative, requiring neither explanation nor recognition (Ahmed, 2012). In keeping with this invisibility, the Web is perceived as non-racial space in which the prototypical user is assumed to be white (Kettrey and Laster, 2014). Although this offers implicit privileges to white actors, given embedded normativity, it does not disturb the alleged neutrality of the online environment.

### **Systemic inequality and enabling conditions for digital enterprise**

Contrary to popular suggestion, systemic inequalities do not disappear when transfigured through the medium of the Internet. From this evidence, it emerges that digital entrepreneurial activity occurs in heterogeneous contexts, and that successful venture creation requires appropriate enabling conditions. Participant experiences suggest that aside from simple access to technology, these conditions coalesce around three interlinked areas: finance, technological knowledge and competence, and applicable previous work experience. These enabling conditions were related to positionality, such that offline intersecting social hierarchies of gender, race and class influenced and shaped the opportunities perceived and pursued in the online environment. Normative gender role expectations meant that successful performance of hegemonic femininity functioned as a cultural resource, resonating with Kelan's observation that although gender in contemporary work environments is said to matter no longer, women are still assumed to possess typical feminine skills that are now considered an asset in business interactions (2009: 25). Normative racial identity (whiteness) emerged as a critical asset; visible minority ethnic designation through images and names was deemed a potential detriment in terms of reaching mainstream markets or, conversely, a

signifier of a niche market/product only suitable for those who share the heritage of the entrepreneurial actor.

Rather than being a neutral or levelling space, the online environment merely reflected the social inequalities evident in the lives of respondents. Prior higher status employment was associated with greater stocks of savings for start-up capital, as well as access to networks offering accessible and pertinent knowledge and technical support. This evidence reflects arguments emphasising the relevance of social positionality and life chance conditions to entrepreneurial activity, due to their impacts upon class and life course pathways (Anderson and Miller, 2003; Jayawarna et al., 2014). Additionally, the importance of social and human capital accrued in prior higher status employment challenges the popular notion that ‘anyone’ can start a viable online business with minimal investment. Respondents offered numerous examples of how offline stigmas and disadvantages persisted within the online context, such that for women, it neither eliminates sexism nor resolves tensions between work and family life (Marlow, 2014; Mirchandani, 2000). Rather, there is a paradox between the everyday rhetoric of digital equality and the reality of familiar inequity. Digital enterprise has the scope to exacerbate class-based inequalities regarding the accrual of, or access to, technological knowledge. The rate of change and volume of information available is daunting for those with limited knowledge; even for the most skilled, having both time and financial resources to exploit rapidly changing technology is essential to maintaining successful enterprises on the web.

For Black and Asian women, these experiences were complicated by racialised challenges to online self-representation. As white elite and upper middle-class males dominate positions of power in advanced Western economies, normalised and naturalised by socially constructed hegemonic practice (Acker, 2006; Bradley, 2007), whiteness and

masculinity provide intangible resources to entrepreneurial legitimacy. This is exacerbated for women of colour and others whose physical appearance visibly signifies 'difference' from the norm. Whether or not they opt to whitewash their sites, habitual practices undertaken online can lead to the unconscious enactment of embodied identities (Schultze, 2014). Such evidence suggests that embodied disadvantage is reproduced in the online space, as even respondents with high levels of human capital and managerial expertise face barriers to self-representation given racial discrimination and anti-Blackness in particular (Woods, 2013). Both subtle and blatant racial discrimination is evident in work contexts, as well as online (Kettrey and Laster, 2014; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011), forcing entrepreneurs of colour to grapple with difficult, indeed shocking, choices when deciding how to portray themselves. In contrast, actors whose identities reflect the mainstream 'ideal' entrepreneurial type (Ogbor, 2000; Ahl, 2006) are able to expend considerably less effort on how they present themselves to audiences and potential clients. This privilege is a significant resource not afforded to those whose bodies and ways of being are othered by a non-dominant positionality, particularly with regard to race. It is clear that the acquisition of key human capital resources, whilst beneficial to most entrepreneurial processes, is not sufficient to overcome the disadvantages posed by the racialised structures within the dominant socio-economic context.

This evidence supports literature suggesting that disadvantaged positionality reduces the likelihood of accessing appropriate enabling conditions, particularly in access to finance, social networks, and educational and employment experiences that contribute to knowledge, all of which were here found to be crucial to the start-up process. Positionality influences which entrepreneurial activities may be pursued, as the higher-margin, knowledge-based online services businesses enabled by Internet technologies (Mason et al., 2011) were relatively inaccessible to people of working class backgrounds without qualifications and professional experience. This disadvantage was compounded by gender and race, with

additional challenges faced when attempting to overcome the constraints of gender-based caring responsibilities, enter sexist environments and avoid racial discrimination.

These findings extend entrepreneurship theory by illuminating the heterogeneity of experiences amongst digital entrepreneurial actors and how social positionality influences access to entrepreneurial resources. Drawing from this evidence, we dispute claims that the digital environment opens up new possibilities for meritocratic entrepreneurial activity; rather, the potential exists for the emergence of yet another discourse linking marginality with deficiency, thereby reproducing the ‘same old story’ (Ahl and Marlow, 2012).

**Limitations and future research**

Limitations to the empirical study are acknowledged; there are small numbers in each sub-category, thus, future research needs to replicate and extend this study. Moreover, whilst the evidence regarding constrained access to resources illustrates theoretical analyses of class influences, we acknowledge that it is especially important to ensure that the most marginal individuals are afforded greater visibility. Future research should focus directly upon such groups, particularly working class women given that they are seen as those who might benefit most from online opportunities (Thompson Jackson, 2009). A further related limitation is that the sample, for access reasons, did not include members of UK new migrant populations and non-English speaking ethnic minority entrepreneurs. Neither did it consider as primary the intersections of alternative characteristics, such as age or geographic location. However, it is suggested that the theoretical framework and contributions of this research may be applied to facilitate future research into how digital entrepreneurship is experienced by members of these and other populations. Future studies may also wish to consider taking the household as the unit of analysis, or engage in multi-level analysis, ideally with a longitudinal real-time design to capture long-term business outcomes.

## Conclusion and implications

In addressing our research question regarding how intersectional positionality affects the accrual of entrepreneurial resources by women undertaking digital ventures, we critique the notion that the Internet is a meritocratic space for entrepreneurial activity. Rather, we argue that offline positionality has the capacity to constrain entrepreneurial potential in the online space. Drawing upon cyberfeminist theorising (Daniels, 2009) which disputes arguments that the virtual environment is distinct from the social world, we explore the manner in which the idealised entrepreneurial actor is transposed into the digital context. In effect, the physicality of the subject penetrates the virtual domain via a variety of visual and textual representations, which have the scope to offer advantages to those who meet stereotypical normativity. Our critical analysis, supported by empirical evidence, suggests that as a socio-technical artefact, the online environment reflects, reproduces and potentially exacerbates offline social hierarchies.

Given the alleged promise of the Internet as a new site of entrepreneurial opportunity realisation, the implications of such arguments are far reaching. The current trend of encouraging digital enterprise as a means to social mobility and economic independence for the disadvantaged is, at the least, questionable. If positionality and structural inequality are not taken into consideration, those who encounter the discourse of digital meritocratic possibility can only make sense of under-achievement through assumed agentic inadequacy. There is an inherent contradiction between the potential afforded to digital enterprise and the actuality of its realisation; unfortunately, those for whom this is allegedly an enhancing space are most likely to be vulnerable to failure and its related consequences. We progress extant theory by focusing upon the heterogeneity of digital entrepreneurial actors and how social positionality both constrains and enables venture creation and performance through resourcing issues. Whilst successful online venturing is primarily associated with

technological knowledge, we demonstrate that material, cultural and tacit resources are essential to this process. Accrual of diverse resources is theoretically framed as embedded within positionality, which informs unequal structural distribution mechanisms that persist within the online context. We use intersectionality and positionality theory to build a theoretical platform for future research, linking these constructs to cyberfeminist, critical race studies and cyberculture literature (Daniels, 2009; Nakamura, 2008; boyd, 2009). In so doing, we integrate contemporary perspectives to enable a novel critique of the popular assumptions surrounding digital entrepreneurship.

The overarching contribution of this article, however, extends beyond its central critique of the Internet as a neutral and meritocratic entrepreneurial platform to a wider critique of entrepreneurship in general as a meritocratic activity. It concludes that the ontological assumptions underpinning much of the discourse on entrepreneurship, and on digital entrepreneurship in particular, are marred by their inattention to the socially embedded nature of such activities. Policy initiatives suggesting that the Internet can be a ‘great leveller’ for social inequalities should proceed with caution, lest they become part of evangelical contemporary rhetoric promoting the potential of entrepreneurship for the marginalised and disadvantaged.

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**Table 1. Sample characteristics**

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Age</b>		
18-30	3	11.5
31-40	10	38.5
41-50	9	34.6
51-60	4	15.4
<b>Race</b>		
White British	13	50

Black British	8	30.8
British Asian	4	15.4
Mixed-Race	1	3.8
<b>Socio-economic Class</b>		
Upper – Middle	7	26.9
Middle – Middle	10	38.5
Lower – Middle	4	15.4
Working Class – Upper	2	7.7
Working Class – Feminised	1	3.8
Working Class – Un/underemployed	1	3.8
Precariat	1	3.8
<b>Start-up Funding (£)</b>		
0-500	9	34.6
500-1K	4	15.4
1K-10K	1	3.8
10-20K	4	15.4
20-50K	5	19.2
50-100K	1	3.8
Declined to answer	2	7.7
<b>Industry Sector<sup>iii</sup></b>		
Health and Beauty	5	19.2
Fashion & Accessories	7	26.9
Digital Marketing	5	19.2
Publishing	2	7.7
Children’s Products/Services	3	11.5
Other Professional Services	6	23.1
<b>Product/Service</b>		
Product Only	9	34.6
Service Only	11	42.3
Combination	6	23.1
<b>Years of Operation</b>		
0-3	14	53.9
3-5	2	7.7
5-8	6	23.1
8+	4	15.3

<sup>i</sup> Indeed, using large data bases and weighting variables to create matched studies exploring the performance of male and female led ventures (Robb & Watson, 2012) demonstrates that women led firms perform slightly better. Thus, a range of gender related influences constrain women's entrepreneurial activity but their minority presence within the domain cannot be prescribed to any form of any ability deficit (Marlow, 2014).

<sup>ii</sup> There also exist a number of studies of female ethnic minority entrepreneurs, which, whilst providing useful data and insights, do not engage an intersectional framing (e.g. Davidson et al, 2010; Kwong et al, 2009). However, some later work (e.g. Fielden and Davidson, 2012) demonstrates a shift towards an explicitly intersectional perspective.

<sup>iii</sup> The total number of businesses in 'Industry Sector' exceeds 26 because some respondents ran multiple businesses across sectors.

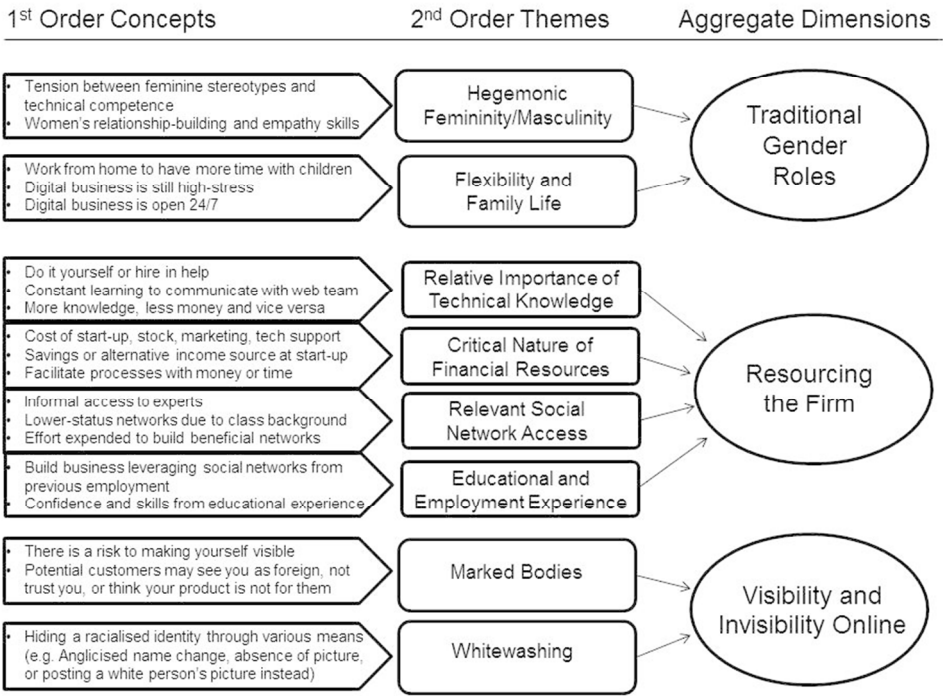


Figure 1. Data Structure  
254x190mm (96 x 96 DPI)